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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 COLOMBO 000455

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

DOL/ILAB FOR TINA MCCARTER

STATE FOR INL, SCA/INS, DRL/IL FOR LAUREN HOLT

MCC FOR S GROFF, D NASSIRY AND E BURKE

TREASURY FOR LESLIE HULL

GENEVA PASS USTR

E.O 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [ELAB](#) [ETRD](#) [MARR](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [KISL](#) [EAID](#) [MV](#)

SUBJECT: MALDIVES: DRUGS, EDUCATION, ISLAMIC EXTREMISM AND WOMEN'S
ISSUES TOP ISSUES DISCUSSED DURING U/S FORE'S VISIT

REF: A) COLOMBO 429, B) COLOMBO 423, C) COLOMBO 289

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. This cable contains an Action Request in Paragraph 14. During Under Secretary of State for Management Fore's March 7 visit to Maldives, in addition to discussions with President Gayoom (Ref A) and female political and business leaders (Ref B), she met separately with the Foreign Minister, Defense Minister, Attorney General, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Minister of Planning and National Development, and the United Nations country team. Interlocutors spoke about the need for improved education, growing use of illegal drugs, women's role in society as adversely affected by extremist Islamic elements, the government's roadmap for political reform, interest (but insufficient capacity) in participating in peacekeeping activities, and desire for increased diplomatic ties through establishing diplomatic posts in Maldives and Washington DC. End summary.

EDUCATION:

DRAWING MORE MALDIVIAN STUDENTS TO US UNIVERSITIES

¶2. (SBU) During a March 7 visit to Maldives, Under Secretary of State for Management Henrietta Fore met separately with Foreign Minister Dr. Ahmed Shaheed, Defense Minister Ismail Shafiu, Attorney General Dr. Hassan Saeed, the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Abdulla Shahid, Minister of Planning and National Development Hamdun Hameed, and the United Nations country team. Several of these officials told U/S Fore they hope to see a significantly higher number of Maldivians study in the United States. Minister of State Shahid noted that word of mouth is very important for students in South Asia when selecting universities. Ambassador Blake, accompanying U/S Fore at her meetings, agreed with Shahid, noting that one particular U.S. university has a significantly higher number of Sri Lankan students than would be expected, as a result of recommendations by Sri Lankan alumni. The Ambassador said Embassy

Colombo would use an upcoming "Friendship Week" to explain educational opportunities in the U.S. and reach out to attract more Maldivian students to American colleges.

13. (SBU) Foreign Minister Shaheed also urged greater Maldivian attendance at U.S. universities, saying Maldivian students need increased exposure to "more liberal thinking." He said that Maldives was historically inclined toward moderate rather than radical Islamist viewpoints, and he hoped to preserve that tradition. He explained that the Maldivian form of Islam comes more from island cultures and east Africa, instead of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. However, he was concerned that nowadays Iran, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia offer Maldivians generous scholarships or drastically reduced education fees, drawing in students who later return to Maldives with more extremist views.

14. (U) With several government interlocutors, U/S Fore and Ambassador Blake discussed the possibility of establishing a Virtual Presence Post, which could include links to U.S. colleges and universities interested in recruiting Maldivian students. Additionally, U/S Fore suggested that the Maldivian government could encourage U.S. college and university representatives traveling to Mumbai or Chennai to make a promotional stop in Maldives.

INCREASED DRUG USE:
EFFORTS AT LAW ENFORCEMENT AND ADDICT REHABILITATION

15. (SBU) Ken Maskall, the UNICEF Resident Representative in Male', told U/S Fore the UN will release an "anthropological study" in early April regarding Maldivian drug use habits. UNICEF initiated the study in 2005 after it became clear during an assessment in the Gaan Atoll that drug abuse was the principal problem on several local islands. Maskall added that Maldivian youth have their first

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encounter with heroin, usually in the form of "brown sugar" that is smoked, when they are from 11 to 14 years of age. UNICEF's priorities include supporting an after-care program, promoting behavioral change, and implementing a drug awareness/prevention program in schools.

16. (SBU) Government officials also expressed concern about the rising drug problem. Minister of Defense Ismail Shafiu identified India, Sri Lanka, and African coastal states as sources for illegal drug shipments. He did not know who was complicit in permitting the influx of drugs, but noted that there was a lot of potential for corruption since the financial stakes are so high. He suggested that the United States encourage Sri Lanka and India to make combating illegal drugs a higher priority.

17. (SBU) In a separate meeting, Attorney General Hassan Saeed agreed that the majority of illegal drugs in Maldives come from India and Sri Lanka. He said that Maldivian youth are now becoming addicted, and noted that Maldives is focusing on demand reduction. He said that the drug rehabilitation center will be privatized, and that a U.S. company is assisting in this process. Saeed posited that the police and armed forces don't cooperate with intelligence forces in combating drugs, although he has advocated the establishment of a Drug Enforcement Agency.

EXTREMIST ELEMENTS:
ERODING SOCIETY AND WOMEN'S ROLES?

18. (SBU) Attorney General Saeed identified the growth of radical Islam as the "biggest problem in this country." He said one method to address the worry would be translating moderate Islamic texts into English for the Maldivian public to read. In a separate meeting, FM Shaheed also expressed worries about a potential rise in Islamic fundamentalism.

19. (SBU) FM Shaheed noted that although the veil is coming into Maldives, with some islands reportedly requiring women to be completely covered, the veil itself isn't particularly a problem. "It's the thinking that comes along with it." He said that in a recent national address, President Gayoom called for a moderate interpretation of Islam. Shaheed said that Maldives wants to host a

conference of Islamist scholars which would demonstrate that radical Islam isn't mainstream Islam. He added that Maldives has a special role to play in terms of promoting its indigenous liberal Islamic mindset.

¶10. (SBU) Abdulla Shahid, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs (a rank that functions as Foreign Secretary) told U/S Fore that women have historically been hindered within the Maldivian culture, not only due to their traditional role in raising children, but also because of less-than equal standing under some laws. As an example, Minister Shahid noted that only a man could be President under the current constitution.

¶11. (SBU) Foreign Minister Shahid also said his government would welcome a speakers' program to bring in distinguished guests to lecture. Ambassador Blake suggested the Women's Coordinator within the State Department as one excellent candidate. U/S Fore, the Ambassador, and Shahid also discussed publishing relevant news articles in the local media and possibly establishing Digital Video Conference capabilities in Maldives so Maldivians can participate in broader discussions with a variety of speakers.

ROADMAP FOR POLITICAL REFORM

¶12. (SBU) In several meetings, U/S Fore encouraged Maldivian government efforts to move forward with their March 2006 "Reform

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Roadmap." FM Shaheed said the Government hopes to achieve roadmap commitments by May 2007, culminating in multi-party elections in late 2008. He added, however, that the public fears political reform might create chaos, and many are concerned that resultant instability could inhibit economic development. He told U/S Fore that Maldives needs assistance in developing professional media and improving public understanding of the rights and duties of a democratic society, as well as increased educational opportunities as noted earlier.

¶13. (SBU) Attorney General Saeed was also hopeful that reforms could pass by May, but assessed that progress depends upon cooperation between the government and the main opposition party. He noted that he seeks to build consensus outside of the legislature, since last year he submitted 22 bills to the Majlis (parliament) and none of them has yet passed. One such bill is a penal code that combines American-style legal protections with elements of Shari'a (Islamic law) as drafted by University of Pennsylvania law professor Paul Robinson under a grant from the UN. Saeed said he would seek training in criminal procedure, and sought further information from the USG on available opportunities.

¶14. (SBU) Action Request: The Department of Justice administers ICITAP, a highly effective international criminal investigative assistance program that includes a course called "Moving to a Democratic Form of Policing." That program would be ideal for training Maldivian police in dealing with public demonstrations (a completely new need since 2005) administering criminal justice, and respecting human rights in the course of arrests, detentions, and investigations. Post unsuccessfully sought ICITAP funding each year for the past few years. Post requests that the Department inform us whether this program could be provided if paid by the Maldivian government, and if so, how we might facilitate the process.

NEED FOR PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS IN RENEWABLE ENERGY, GROUNDWATER, AND COASTAL MANAGEMENT

¶15. (SBU) Minister of Planning and National Development Hamdun Hameed told U/S Fore that Maldives has a development profile most closely aligned with the Oceania (referring to other countries consisting of archipelagos and lacking large or primary islands). He listed some of the challenges and opportunities for Maldives, highlighting the potential for wind, solar and wave energy in Maldives, and the work of one US company, Southwest WindPower in developing a wind pilot project. He asked that US universities with programs in groundwater and coastal structures management assist Maldives in identifying and developing appropriate policies and programs.

PEACEKEEPING PARTICIPATION:
INTERESTED, BUT CONSTRAINED BY CAPACITY

¶16. (SBU) Minister of Defense Shafiu shared with U/S Fore his desire to build up the professional capacity of Maldivian military forces. He expressed thanks for the training provided by the USG, and noted that while some regional countries offer training to Maldives, he emphasizes diversifying the overseas training, noting a strong preference for the UK and the United States. While speaking positively about a future role in peacekeeping operations, he told U/S Fore that the senior levels of the military need more training to "understand what it's all about." Ambassador Blake suggested the Peacekeeping Training Institute in New Delhi as one possible forum for trilateral U.S.-India-Maldives cooperation.

INCREASED DIPLOMATIC TIES:
NEW POSTS IN BOTH COUNTRIES?

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¶17. (SBU) On several occasions, Maldivian government officials noted that Maldives will inaugurate an embassy in Washington, DC, with FM Shaheed saying he expects it to open by early April 2007. U/S Fore and Ambassador Blake welcomed the new embassy and expressed hope FM Shaheed would personally visit and take a continued interest. U/S Fore also noted at several meetings that the USG is considering opening an American Presence Post in Maldives, which she and Ambassador Blake believed would help improve diplomatic ties.

COMMENT:
TOP PRIORITIES

¶18. (SBU) In addition to the cautious steps Maldives is taking toward increased political freedoms and a potential multi-party election in late 2008, the country faces two major challenges: rising drug abuse and an inflow of radical Islamic teaching. The Embassy has advocated an American Presence Post in Male' (Ref C) and was encouraged by U/S Fore's support. In the interim, we are exploring the option of creating a Virtual Presence Post in Maldives. Considering that by law and custom, Maldives is a 100 percent Islamic nation, it is unusually friendly toward the United States, and seeks a dramatic increase in educational and cultural ties with our nation. Their plans to open an embassy in Washington DC, in addition to their current office in New York, signals the importance Maldives attaches to U.S. input as it attempts to move to a freer form of government.

¶19. (U) Under Secretary Fore has cleared this cable.

BLAKE